

Pain, Passion, and Parody: A Dialogue

Jill Dolan and Vivian (Vicki) Patraaka

Our motivation for staging this dialogue was multifold. It partly reflected our desire to continue a conversation with each other around topics of mutual interest and concern; it represented our commitment to feminist discourses that carefully foreground the intellectual interactions from which ideas spring, rather than perpetuating the myth of the scholar writing in inspired solitude; and it offered us an opportunity to engage with a kind of performative object that represented the possibilities of our own geographical remove from sites of live performance activity. For people like us, who live in places where certain kinds of feminist cultural productions don't happen as frequently as they do in other, urban, places, a book like Lenora Champagne's anthology, *Out From Under*,¹ is a necessary if partial document. Our effort to engage theoretically with this text serves in some ways as a model for feminist scholars and practitioners at other sites that appear inaccessible to certain kinds of performance discourses. Our dialogue is an effort to maintain our mutual community and to explore the way our work intersects around issues of pain, identity, postmodernism, and history in the context of performance. The text as it stands now is a kind of palimpsest, rehearsed, spoken and respoken, written and rewritten and spoken again over several years of intellectual engagement. Its gaps extend an invitation to others to theorize the performative as well.

JD: When Judith Butler questions gender as a category of meaning within postmodernism, she asks if its indeterminacy might lead to the failure of feminism.² Can performance art that still calls itself feminist participate in what

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Butler poses as the radical project of problematizing the category of gender? And how can feminist performance really problematize gender as a category if, in the presence of performing, it's always somehow there, available to be read even if it's problematized?

VP: It's important to evaluate the disruptiveness and subversiveness of, for example, the strategies used by the performers in *Out From Under* to problematize gender. I wonder how many of our performers oscillate between hegemonic discourses and what Teresa de Lauretis calls the "space off"—"those other spaces both discursive and social that exist, since feminist practices have (re)constructed them, in the margins of hegemonic discourses . . . in counterpractices and new forms of community"?³ Or are some of the performers more connected to feminist performance strategies of the late seventies and early eighties than our theorizing of postmodernism would allow for? Nonetheless, that tendency to universalize the category Woman that, for example, Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz foregrounded in their work isn't reproduced in the pieces in *Out From Under*. They remind me more of the doubled discourse Bidy Martin describes in her article in *Feminism and Foucault*.⁴ She points to "a conflict between a fundamentally deconstructive impulse [within feminism] and a need to construct the category woman and to search for truths, authenticity, and universals" (13). In response to this apparent contradiction, she advocates a doubled strategy in which feminism "refuse[s] to be content with fixed ideas or to universalize a revolutionary [feminist] subject" (16), but at the same time allows for a strategic essentializing of the category woman as a necessary point of departure for taking a political stance. I do think many of the performance artists in *Out From Under*—Hughes, Finley, even Anderson—strategically insert recognizably feminist material as a kind of gesture of commitment to that doubled discourse.

JD: But what happens to these gestures in performance? For example, you've said that the assumption that the performance of pain is subversive is something to be questioned. But you can really only consider this question in particular audience contexts. One of the things that's interesting to me about the anthology is that the pieces are really de-localized in their transcription as published texts as opposed to performance texts. It's hard to anticipate any kind of response. Even if you project these pieces into a performance setting, there are all sorts of issues about the body and how it reads that need to be added to the transcription of the words and text. As written, much of it seems like poetry or trance poems or much more traditional narratives. There are many interesting ways to worry

about how the presence of an audience in specific local contexts trouble the way these texts appear on the page.

VP: Yes, in a couple of cases, the performers make notes as if they expect someone else to perform them.

JD: They become very different if you anticipate someone else trying to inhabit them. I think we're talking about how the status of these texts as something that passes into public discourse in a larger way has to be bracketed when the only record you have of them is on the page. So the whole question of staging pain in performance, when read through an anthology of performance texts, demands its own reimagining because what we want to really look at is the material body in space.

VP: So how does the female body in performance stage pain which is harder to visualize when read on a page? How does it frame pain, mediate literal pain to the body? How are we materially, discursively, and politically positioned in relationship to this work?

JD: How grounded are these performances in history, when you think about inscribing these performance texts onto a body in space?

VP: Performers like Beatrice Roth and Leeny Sack are very grounded in their own history, however poetically they render it. But even given what Jeanie Forte asserts is "the intensely autobiographical nature of women's performance,"⁵ I think that a lot of this work suggests a kind of multiplicity, a taking up of shifting subject positions, that allows these performers to avoid the autobiographical reference in its most literal, limiting sense. In her introduction, Lenora Champagne writes that these artists perform "being 'other'" (x), but at least some of them explode what Judith Butler refers to as the dialectic of "that dreary binary of Same and Other" (103). I also don't think these writers are trying for a kind of authoritative speaking subject based on personal history. In fact, performers like Sack or Rosenthal fracture the possibility of such authority in the process of performing their histories.

JD: I agree that women's performance art isn't inherently autobiographical. In some ways, they construct a biography, rather than testifying to a personal narrative. But at the same time, I think there is a way in which they are laminated to particular instances of flesh.

VP: And this is especially important since pain, for example, is very easily abstracted, unless it's grounded in history, in "particular instances of flesh." Pain can be as much of a rubric of appropriation as the feminine divorced from its political content and from women themselves. Even within feminism there is the danger that the psychological dimensions of oppression will get overlaid with the physical components of violence to a female body and while I'm not trying to create a hierarchy of pain, once again either the abstract or the psychological threaten to obscure the specific and the particular of the/a body.

JD: Does postmodernism dissolve pain? Might this theoretical position, with its emphasis on shifting subjectivities and centerlessness, become suspect when you focus on the body in pain? Can pain be pleasurable? Does flesh remain beneath sexuality and gender and even beneath a biologically sexed body? Is part of the fascination with pain an uncovering of all these constructions to a place that's only flesh?

VP: In *Teenytown*, Carlos, Hagedorn, and McCauley perform the damaging effects of racist stereotypes and popular images by using their bodies to perform the constructedness of these images, their separation from the actual bodies on which they are imposed, and, simultaneously, to perform the harm done to the actual body that is forced to carry them and upon which they are mapped. It's a kind of doubled discourse.

JD: How does the body work in Hughes's *World without End*? I think she's reinscribing a kind of emotional pain rather than a pain that might be interesting for what it does to the body and how you read it. That's where I see a lot of the autobiographical stuff, in this transcription of her emotion and her attempt to work it out in performance.

VP: When you talk about emotional pain, I think of Beatrice Roth's piece, *The Father*, which is full of those memories of her father, and Rachel Rosenthal's piece, *My Brazil*.

JD: But hers seems so self-conscious about the link she's trying to make between autobiography and global politics.

VP: *My Brazil* feels a little bit like reading Marguerite Duras. But still, she really focuses in on experiencing death in her own body, aging as pain. But I didn't like the way she used the Nazi imagery, I thought she was a little cavalier about it—her infinite possibilities of how she could be positioned in relation to the

Nazis are too simple to account for the complexities of how people were historically positioned in relation to those events.

JD: I think there's a kind of self-righteousness in Rosenthal's work that puts me off. There's a way in which her politics become much less complicated because of how obvious she makes them, because she tries so hard to make them part of her experience. It's a little too insistent for me. Hughes might be the polar opposite, in her attempt to slide all over the place and not make that connection to her politics pre-eminent at all.

VP: One place it does become really self-conscious is the discussion of art school, where Hughes talks about how the overlay of what she learned from her mother makes it impossible for her to learn "universality" at art school. Where does Finley fit?

JD: I'm not sure, because of what she does with her body in performance, and because she describes her performance as channeling, as trance work. My sense is that any comment she may want to make is erased in the process of her creating those personae onstage. It's a little too Artaudian. But what are we asking, how political it is, or how do they do their politics in relation to their autobiographies?

VP: Maybe the latter. But I don't think Finley's *The Constant State of Desire* is autobiographical. In Finley's work, it's someone's history all right, but we don't get the certification of performer joined to narrative. The voices themselves don't establish clearly defined personae, the borders between them blur, so, at best, the autobiographical is a place of indeterminacy for Finley. You're always so caught up you don't know if she's the victim of incest . . .

JD: . . . if she's the little girl who's put in the refrigerator by the father . . .

VP: She mixes them up in an interesting way so the audience can't contain the voices within individual narratives and the restraints on both emotion and the extent of damage that implies. But, on another level, she also doesn't have to take responsibility for them. She can use anything—shift quickly into the persona of a gay male with AIDS, for example—and that's a little problematic.

JD: What does it mean, then, if you want to see some sort of person behind the work being accountable and responsible? I wonder what that is, that spectatorial desire to know "the truth" of how it fits her.

VP: Maybe it's our own insistence to narrativize and maybe that's the very thing she keeps trying to disturb.

JD: Or to attach a narrative to a person, to give it a body.

VP: To turn it into testimony?

JD: I wouldn't say consciously that that's what I want to see out of performance, but I think there's always some of that in there, especially in performance art, as opposed to acting. You never expect testimony in more traditional kinds of theatre, but because of the conventions of performance art, there's something about truth always present in it. That's ironic, since people call it postmodern; you're looking for some base of truth.

VP: Unlike acting where someone else can always step into it.

JD: Right, and artifice is part of the game. But because the performance artist's body is there, for some reason it looks real, it looks less mediated than theatre does. I don't know if that's politically more effective, or not. How do people like Leeny Sack address this problem of narrative and autobiography? With Sack's *The Survivor and the Translator*, as you've said, she's so clearly trying to make sense of an experience that's not her own. Part of that breakdown is an effort to embody what you can't know, rather than an effort to testify to what you do know.

VP: And if there's any narrative to Sack's piece at all, it's that of the resistance to translation, to embodying. She uses those fragments from other authors in the first half of the piece to add to the multiplicity of narratives and cultural contexts rather than insist on one relationship with one Holocaust survivor, although that comes across powerfully. Again, it's a kind of doubled discourse: she says, "The story I tell was slipped under my skin before I could say yes or no or mama," but she also says, "I sit inside the memory of where I was not" (124). So she embodies both her grandmother's narrative and its unspeakable absence. Sack's piece is interesting to me in a way that Fiona Templeton's piece, *Strange to Relate*, isn't. Templeton has a conceptual art sense of the body as a symbol of past events, even, as she puts it, as that body is materialized but always only *as* representation (182).

JD: Why is it that the work in this genre, that attempts to theorize about itself, is the least compelling?

VP: Well, I think some of the most effective work is tropological; it doesn't perform theory directly. An example that pertains to many pieces is the use of small animals—birds, mice, dogs, small exotic animals, a porcupine—as a way of conveying a set of relations and identities by which the performer is temporarily located. Also, the metaphor of translation and of a doubled language appears in work by Hughes, Rosenthal, Sack, Anderson, and in *Teenytown*. This metaphor usually signifies the difficulty of, and the performer's own resistance to, "translation," to creating simple equivalences such as for Hughes's mother's French/sexuality and Sack's grandmother's Polish/history of atrocity.

JD: These texts are also infinitely more theatricalized and more self-reflexive about how they're employing certain familiar conventions of theatre. They ironize the form more playfully than something like Templeton's, which is didactic formally as well as thematically.

VP: Like the simultaneously humorous and painful historical references to mass culture performed in *Teenytown*.

JD: And when you read Hughes, you get all her very sarcastic references to traditional theatre in her stage directions, which are a great parody of the kind of theatre she says she's not doing, even though she sort of is. There's something much more playful and pleasurable about it, which in some ways offers an invitation to break the frame more actively than more didactic invitations like Templeton's.

VP: We can also include Laurie Anderson's *United States*, that moment when she's at the fortuneteller where "everything she told me was totally wrong." At first she thinks it's "a translation problem" (52) for the fortuneteller, so she puts her other hand out for a second reading and the woman puts her second hand out, but only for more money.

JD: It's very wry and it makes an interesting connection with the irony of identity as commodity, without hitting you over the head with it.

VP: You talk about her irony, but there's also this sense of desperation on the part of the persona mixed in with it. She keeps her hand out for all those minutes to get the answer to her identity and her future. But by the time you have to put out your second hand, it's all over, no stable, fixed identity is possible.

JD: But that sort of ironic desperation is much more interesting to me than performance artists who set themselves up as women who have the answer in the palm of their hand and make assumptions about how it can translate to spectators.

VP: When you put it in a seventies context, you've got to credit Lacy and Labowitz for organizing thousands of women on that *Take Back the Night March*, in San Francisco in 1978, and Lacy, in 1984, for bringing together all those older women for *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*. If they thought they had the answer, they at least distributed it in these media events so that ordinary women could perform them at public sites and add to them. That's very different from the gesture of the single performer. When you're the single person having that answer, I think it's more politically suspect.

JD: Because you think it's about individual "empowerment" more than empowerment across locations?

VP: Yes, and sometimes the single performer's emphasis on the conceptual takes it out of history. Lacy and Labowitz did ground their work in the history of what's been done to female bodies and in various statistics about rape and about female aging and so forth.

JD: And at least they're clear about the historical moment they're creating it in. The doing of it becomes very much a part of history, whereas for some of these other pieces, I think it's about an erasing of the historical moment it's performed in.

VP: In *Teenytown*, Carlos, Hagedorn, and McCauley do a wonderful job of shifting and sharing their historical positions amongst themselves, thereby marking them but not delimiting them to particular individuals. Ironically, that text is dead center in the middle of the book as a context for all the other, individual pieces that make up the rest of it.

JD: Placing *Teenytown* there foregrounds the lack of a sense of community in my reading of some of the white women's work and even the lesbians' work. Who is the community that these pieces speak to? *Teenytown*, because perhaps it's a transcription of a more collaborative piece, seems rooted in a kind of community of ethnicity, of marginalization, that's struggling together to make connections over difference, to work through hegemonic theatrical and historical conventions, to find a different way of reading those places. There's an invitation to a spectatorial community that's much more explicit than it is in the other

pieces . . . an invitation to see the critique and to share a sense of erasure in cultural forms and the possibility of constructing a resistant identity in the subversion of them.

VP: And by implication, in their performance of *Teenytown*, Thought Music challenges the relationship between a single performance artist and her audience, that structure of assumed community. But both Holly Hughes and Karen Finley do make some kind of reference to a subcultural audience that's inscribed in the piece.

JD: Who do you think Finley addresses subculturally?

VP: She addresses a postmodern, avant-garde art audience. She mobilizes their collective rage very early in the piece by talking about the yuppie entrepreneurs who are ruining their Lower East Side neighborhood. She describes it as a kind of rape, so both female and male spectators could have responded as a community to her sexualizing of both this commodification and her imagined revenge in the gourmet chocolate balls fed back to their previous owners.

JD: How is that different for Hughes's *World Without End*?

VP: I see her as saying to a lesbian audience, "Okay, what do you make of this? How far can you extend the category 'lesbian'?"

JD: In *Teenytown*, it seems as though there's an effort to create an audience community through the piece that doesn't pre-exist it, while there's something in *World Without End* that's written for an audience that does pre-exist it, in order to challenge its assumptions about the kinds of identities that comprise its community.

VP: Leeny Sack also tries to construct a spectatorship through the material she's presenting—one both ready to feel the pain of the events she relates and to assent to the unavailability of these events to full description or coherent narrative. I'm also grateful for the inclusion in *Out From Under* of as many Jewish women as it contains—Beatrice Roth and Leeny Sack and Rachel Rosenthal . . . it might be viewed as a bit "politically incorrect" to include so many Jews who speak to their cultural experience.

JD: Why?

VP: Oh, partly because of the political positioning of Israel and the readings of Zionism on the Left People even say, "I'm sick and tired of hearing about the Holocaust," as if it were always used as a kind of transcendental signifier of what genocide is or even of what constitutes oppression. That is certainly not how Sack uses it and many contemporary scholars of the Holocaust don't either. I do think many American Jews hold on to this history, nurture it, sometimes in spite of ourselves. Sometimes I ask myself, "Why am I still doing work on the Holocaust and theater? Aren't there other things to get on to?"

JD: What do you answer?

VP: I don't have an answer beyond the obvious of facing history, keeping it alive, and offering that history and its dramatic representations to other scholars. And it does teach me about how the Other can be genocidally constructed and the way tropes used in that construction get recycled from one era and to the next, and from one group to another. And about the relationship of dramatic representation to atrocity and historical memory. I also think that if you don't have another kind of narrative of history and tradition, and I don't, you end up with historical pain. Israelis sometimes criticize American Jews for their preoccupation with the Holocaust, but it's more complicated than that, partly because of the long-standing Israeli desire to create an identity in opposition to the Holocaust victim, versus, for example, the American position of painful questioning about the ways the American Jewish establishment responded at the time to what was happening. We're positioned differently historically and we have different goals. This is a little bit of a digression, but when we talk about the politics of location, of locating yourself, maybe it doesn't have to be autobiographical in the simplest sense. Maybe somebody like Leeny Sack is locating herself in her own history and her own culture through her family, and maybe that act of location has to happen.

JD: That's right. I hate to set Holly Hughes up as a straw dog, but I think the lesbian analogy is troubling. If Leeny Sack is trying to work out an inexorable historical moment to which she has a direct relation, Hughes's moment of fucking that man in this text is infuriating and fascinating to me for just those reasons. On some level, it diminishes history; it's an erasure of the lesbians who couldn't move back and forth that easily, who couldn't frame their identity in perhaps more complicated, fluid ways. On another level, it's projecting into the future a kind of anti-identity politics debate in which, of course, the category of sexuality or sexual practice becomes of necessity more fluid and more

complicated and has to be hewed to a lesbian audience anticipating a move into a kind of queer politics in the nineties.

VP: And it's framed as an empowerment for both herself and her audience.

JD: Yes. It is framed as an empowerment, even though I wish she hadn't said, "Do you have any idea at all who you are porking? I'm the pre-eminent lesbian performance artist from southern Michigan" (31). It's not the sense of her saying it to that man that I find offensive, it's her saying it to the lesbian audience through saying it to the man in the performance that's offensive. But this still squares with what we said before about her challenging the categories, so what I guess this points to is my own ambivalence about how these categories are shifting.

VP: I also appreciate the paradigm of the lesbian and the mother, the lesbian and her very pained, crazed, brave heterosexual mother. Joan Nestle⁶ includes this image of the mother who suffers for her aggressive expression of female heterosexual desire as well in her book *A Restricted Country*: "Oh my mama," Nestle writes, "the things you liked to do[,] fuck and suck cock" (86). It's an interesting relation both writers are exploring. What I think Hughes is trying to do is translate her mother's active, aware sexuality, which is heterosexual, as a way of exploring her own gayness and sexual power. Judith Butler talks about gender transgressions and challenging the distinction between "heterosexual and lesbian erotic exchange and underscoring the points of their ambiguous convergence and redistribution" (101). Is Hughes trying to translate heterosexuality to assimilate it into lesbianism or to finally get to that place of conversion and redistribution? And yet we both have the same question, how can you do that to a lesbian audience?

JD: Does that mean you can't bring your lesbian audience out of history with you? That the audience always bears the weight of the history of its community, however fluid and contested the performer wants that identity to be? I wonder about the difference between how Hughes and Split Britches address a lesbian community . . . the darkness of Hughes's work, the mania and psychosis of it . . . although Kate Davy recently reminded me that Hughes's current work is much more domesticated than early pieces like *The Lady Dick*.

VP: The group Split Britches includes a woman, Deb Margolin, who sometimes, as in *Little Women: The Tragedy*, positions herself as both Jewish and

heterosexual. So it's not a translation of a certain kind of heterosexual voice, such as Hughes does with her mother's voice.

JD: I still think that Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver don't do sexuality in the same way. I think that ultimately, they're about reading gender through a politically positioned lesbian sexuality. Hughes is much more about sexuality than she is about gender. That's why she's more frightening and sometimes more compelling.

VP: Do you think *Little Women* was a way of Split Britches trying to talk about sex? The piece rejects not only the specific prescriptions against the often sexually unacceptable, but the marginalizing, negative labeling, and closeting that create the conditions for its continued existence as unacceptable. Maybe it's more about challenging the cultural conditions that mitigate against women expressing sexual desire, especially by burlesquing the culturally encoded gestures of desire and sexuality as they manifest themselves in climates of heightened censorship and repression.

JD: I like *Little Women* because it's self-reflexive about itself as theatre. All the contextualizing of looking, and the gaze, and looking at bodies—that moment when they reveal themselves naked behind the shower curtain is interesting, but I don't think that they're about sex. I don't know why I want them to be, except that I still think sexuality retains this threat in a way that a critique of gender doesn't, necessarily, anymore. I don't know why I'm trying to save this little place for sex. I don't mean to mystify it, but I still believe the enactment of it can be transgressive in performance.

VP: Where do we put Karen Finley, whose images I find so violent, so full of pain?

JD: I think she's about sex as violence. Butler thinks drag subverts the expressive model of gender by inserting a dissonance between sex and gender identity and the performance of gender, which can be most effectively communicated through parody. There's something Finley does that's not parodic, even though she inhabits differently gendered personae. I think maybe she reifies gender categories, rather than deconstructing them. That's why her narratives can only be about violence, not about parody or sex.

VP: She reifies the categories, whereas Butler is trying to undo them. Butler denies that there's a semiotic place prior to the construction of patriarchy. If Finley explores that in her work, then all this seemingly hysteric issuance out of

the body that she performs would actually be part of our social constructions of gender and sexuality pushed to a certain kind of extreme. I think Finley inserts a history of the female body that disallows the appropriation of the feminine as a kind of degendered, dehistoricized becoming. Maybe the woman performing can't be as easily disembodied as the woman in other genres because of the presence of the live body, however mediated. . . . It's interesting that you mentioned the absence of the parodic in Finley's work, because you might think Finley uses all sorts of parodic appropriations of the pornographic female body in her work.

JD: But only textually. When I think about what happens to her body in performance—nothing happens. It's decorated, but it's not like she does drag, nothing changes. She just becomes a vessel for language, rather than an agent of its deconstruction. I think it's partly because her body is insistently female, and if nothing else, her biology is reified.

VP: I wonder, getting back to pieces specifically about sex and sexual practice . . .

JD: I'm starting to think that raunchiness and bawdiness is the way to go with theatre, because it reveals all the underpinnings. I think I still believe that theatre is all about sex. There's something in there structurally or ideologically . . . or it's because you look and looking is always eroticized . . . that makes theatre, or the spaces where there are performers and spectators, ultimately about sex.

VP: So if looking is always eroticized, how is the discourse on pain connected to performance? Is pain in performance also a subset of sex?

JD: Or does pain make the pleasure of looking pornographic? And does representing pain visually or narratively call attention to the pleasure of the visual in a Brechtian way that inspires critique?

VP: Yes, so that we are reminded that there are limits to that gaze, limits to a certain kind of pleasurable spectatorship.

JD: And a point at which you say, "I can't look" or "I must look." Sometimes you have to look at the things which make you the most uncomfortable, to figure out why they're painful or pleasurable, and how those intersect.

VP: And how we've been inscribed by just those relations between pleasure and pain.

JD: As spectators and as performing bodies. Butler argues that there are consequences when you transgress normative ways of performing gender and sex, which means pain always lurks somewhere. You said once that for people who are invested in keeping the privileges they get from a binary opposition such as that between heterosexuality and homosexuality, chaos always lurks in the thought of its undoing. But there's a kind of pain that always lurks, too, for people who want to transgress gender binaries. Maybe that's part of the danger of the visual—knowing that there's the possibility for pain along with the possibility for pleasure.

VP: If performance is always about sex because looking is eroticized, it makes it clear why it's so dangerous to put historical events about pain into that frame, to risk, for example, pornographically sexualizing the body in pain. I also think pornography is a much more shifting category in terms of the material that it uses and produces in order to create itself than the strictly sexual. You can perform medical pornographies, accident porn, all sorts of pornographies of suffering. The spectatorial relationship is always in danger of succumbing to that eroticized suffering.

JD: Maybe, ironically, pornography leads us to catharsis. Champagne suggests that it's possible or desirable to have it in a postmodern era when she states that the performance artists she's included "provide and provoke the intellectual stimulation, gritty gutsiness and fundamental passions that make it possible to experience catharsis in the postmodern era, and that inspire one to take action" (xiii).

VP: Catharsis *and* action? Brecht would never agree. And I think catharsis is addictive, calls for more of itself, and ever more heightened effects to produce it. It reminds me of the way early spectators of Finley came to her work to see ever more shocking displays. Anyway, why would Champagne want to reinscribe that Aristotelian structure onto these women, even in modified form?

JD: Perhaps she's saying that the irony of the postmodern style replaces what she calls the earlier, raw emotion. Does her comment indicate a nostalgic desire to make sure that emotion remains?

VP: Okay, it's true that a non-resistant postmodernism would always maintain a constant, apolitical ironizing, but irony is only one postmodern strategy. Another is to locate all kinds of emotions outside of that traditional psychological construct that we've gotten from realism. Finley, for example, is good at creating very strong emotion outside the confines of that psychological narrative of emotion and how it manifests itself theatrically.

JD: And what about the chaotic emotions that break down the binaries? And all the other emotions that can't be contained in this very phallic progression toward catharsis?

VP: Then how many of these performances are in that sense excessive? And deliberately so? Is there a place in feminist performance art for excess, as there isn't anywhere else?

JD: And for excessive emotion. That's part of the conceptual performance art problem—there's no room for excess, there's no room for affect, it's all so contained and cerebral.

VP: So it wouldn't be testimony, or autobiography per se, but it would be this emotion . . .

JD: Passion.

VP: Passion. I think there's passion in Rachel Rosenthal talking about her early sexuality. . . . And the way in which Leeny Sack dislocates her passion in a series of abstract gestures from the agony of that testimony.

JD: Another way to rethink the danger of a non-resistant postmodern ironizing is by joining Butler's notion of gender parody with postmodernist, parodic cultural strategies. One thing that *Teenytown*, for example, addresses regarding postmodernism and parody is the question of whether you can recuperate stereotypes and whether parody is always readable. They use drag, they use vintage racist cartoons and film footage . . . They require an affirmation of the history of racist images, and work parodically to both critique them and recuperate them. I question who is the competent reader of these critiques or who can only see footage of racist cartoons as transparent?

VP: They're asking for a certain knowledge of history in order to get what they're doing.

JD: Maybe all postmodernism demands that. You have to know the metanarratives in order to understand their deconstruction.

VP: Can you take the history of an image, present it, and recode it?

JD: In order to perpetuate a comment, don't you have to know that history, doesn't it require a certain spectator competency to even read the commentary instead of just reinscribing the history?

VP: We started this conversation talking about pain. Don't you think it's interesting that we've ended up talking about passion and parody?

JD: It either means you can't rest on pain or that the only way to represent it is with passion and parody. I don't know.

VP: Maybe we don't want to talk about pain . . . or maybe it's because we were talking about the pleasure of spectatorship and the limits of that pleasure.

JD: I want to resist the impulse to say that we kept shying away from pain because on some level you can't fathom it. . . . I'm beginning to think it's really challenging to try to theorize pleasure because pain is always there. It resembles the binary that theory sets up between deconstruction and reconstruction. If pain, as you've said, is about dissolving subjectivity, then pleasure becomes its reconstructive moment, and so does passion. I think it's positive that this is where we end up. It doesn't disregard the fact that the conversation started and is on one level about pain, but I think we end in a reconstructive vein.

VP: Maybe passion is a kind of key to a resistant postmodern practice. Maybe a postmodern practice that's resistant is about passion, in terms of both pain and pleasure. To isolate one from the other is to look at these performance pieces in a limited way, because I think the most effective of them do mix pleasure and historical pain in a passionate resistant practice.

JD: What we've been talking about through this whole dialogue is a kind of situated, historical, engaged, located, exploration of pain that can only be done passionately.

VP: And that kind of exploration, especially in performance art, doesn't have to be couched within either the tenets of realism or of autobiography. The historical

sites can be shifting as well as the personae. It doesn't have to be limited to an expository narrative and the works we've been looking at offer several kinds of fruitful strategies to avoid this.

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Notes

1. Lenora Champagne, ed., *Out from Under: Texts by Women Performance Artists* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990). Its contents include Holly Hughes's *World without End*, Beatrice Roth's *The Father*, a selection from Laurie Anderson's *United States*, Karen Finley's *The Constant State of Desire*, Rachel Rosenthal's *My Brazil*, Laurie Carlos and Jessica Hagedorn and Robbie McCauley's *Teenytown*, Leeny Sack's *The Survivor and the Translator*, Lenora Champagne's *Getting Over Tom*, and Fiona Templeton's *Strange to Relate*.

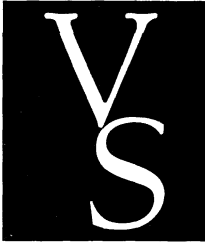
2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), see especially Preface ix-xi.

3. Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986) 26.

4. Biddy Martin, "Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault," in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, eds. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1988) 3-19.

5. Jeanie Forte, "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP) 258.

6. Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1987), see especially "Two Women: Regina Nestle, 1910-1978, And Her Daughter, Joan" 78-99.



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CONTENTS

Silas Marner and the Sexual Possibilities
of the Commodity

Jeffery Nunokowa

"I am the Woman for Spirit":
A Working Woman's Gender Transgression
in Victorian London

Camilla Townsend

The Double Lives of Man: Narration and
Identification in the Late Nineteenth-Century
Representation of Ec-centric Masculinities

Ed Cohen

Technologies of Monstrosity:
Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

Judith Halberstam

Reimagining Masculinity in Victorian
Criticism: Swinburne and Pater

Thais Morgan